

Assessing Pragmatic Competence in ESL Learners: A Case Study on Speech Act Realizations in Academic Discourse

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Abstract. This study investigates the pragmatic competence of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners, focusing specifically on how they realize speech acts in academic discourse. Utilizing a mixed-methods approach, we collected data from discourse completion tasks and follow-up interviews with 120 ESL students across five universities in the United States. The analysis revealed significant discrepancies in the use of speech acts compared to native English speakers, particularly in expressions of requests and refusals. Quantitative metrics indicated a 30% higher error rate in pragmatic appropriateness among ESL learners. These findings highlight the critical need for targeted pedagogical interventions aimed at enhancing pragmatic skills within ESL curricula, thereby fostering better communicative competence in academic settings.

Keywords: pragmatic competence, ESL learning, speech acts, academic discourse, language education, pedagogical strategies, cross-cultural communication, second language acquisition

Introduction

The global significance of effective communication in academia cannot be overstated, particularly in an increasingly interconnected world where English serves as the lingua franca. As of 2024, the pressure for ESL (English as a Second Language) learners to navigate academic discourse effectively has never been greater, necessitating a thorough

understanding of pragmatic competence—defined here as the ability to use language effectively in a contextually appropriate manner. Despite extensive research on language acquisition, the specific area of pragmatic competence, particularly in academic settings, remains underexplored. Previous studies have often focused on grammatical correctness at the expense of pragmatic appropriateness, resulting in a gap in understanding how ESL learners realize speech acts. Many studies have employed limited sample sizes or failed to consider the diverse backgrounds of ESL students, thus overlooking the multifaceted nature of pragmatic learning. Consequently, this research aims to address these gaps by formulating the research questions: How do ESL learners realize speech acts in academic discourse compared to native speakers? What implications do these realizations have for pedagogical practices? The paper is structured as follows: the methodology elaborates on data collection and analysis techniques; results and discussions examine the findings in detail; the conclusion synthesizes the study's contributions.

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Methodology

The empirical framework of this study is based on a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques to assess pragmatic competence among ESL learners. We utilized discourse completion tasks (DCTs) designed to elicit speech act realizations from participants, focusing on requests and refusals, which are critical in academic discourse. The DCTs were administered to 120 ESL learners enrolled in universities across the United States. Participants were recruited from a diverse range of backgrounds to ensure a representative sample. Data collection involved the use of a custom-built MATLAB application (version R2021b) to manage and process participant responses efficiently. Qualitative follow-up interviews were conducted to gain deeper insights into learners' thought processes and contextualized understanding of their speech act realizations. The interviews were transcribed using NVivo (version 12) for qualitative analysis. We applied the SPSS software (version 26) for statistical analysis, specifically employing ANOVA and chi-square tests to evaluate the significance of differences in speech act realizations between ESL learners and native speakers. The analysis revealed key patterns in pragmatic appropriateness and provided a robust framework for understanding the implications of these findings on teaching strategies in ESL contexts.

Results and Discussion

The results of this study reveal critical insights into the pragmatic competence of ESL learners, particularly in their realization of speech acts. Quantitative analysis indicated that ESL learners exhibited a 30% higher error rate in pragmatic appropriateness compared to native speakers, particularly in the context of making requests and refusals. For instance, the statistical significance of these findings was confirmed with a p-value less than 0.01, indicating robust differences between the groups. Furthermore, qualitative data from

interviews highlighted that ESL learners often resorted to formulaic expressions, which, while grammatically correct, lacked the nuance expected in academic discourse. This raises important questions regarding the effectiveness of current ESL curricula, which may prioritize grammatical accuracy over pragmatic usage. The discussion further explores the implications of these findings, advocating for integrated pedagogical strategies that emphasize not only linguistic accuracy but also the contextual and cultural dimensions of language use. By addressing these aspects, educators can better prepare ESL learners for the complexities of academic communication, ultimately enhancing their overall communicative competence.

Conclusions

This study contributes to the existing body of literature on ESL education by highlighting the critical disparity between the pragmatic competencies of ESL learners and those of native speakers. The findings underscore the urgent need for pedagogical reforms that prioritize the teaching of pragmatic skills, particularly in high-stakes academic contexts. Practical recommendations include the incorporation of contextualized language practice and the use of authentic materials to bridge the gap in pragmatic understanding. Future research should explore longitudinal impacts of such pedagogical strategies on learner outcomes, as well as the role of cultural factors in shaping pragmatic competence among ESL students.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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